

Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction

Volume 7
Issue 2 *The Journal of Mine Action*

Article 4

August 2003

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Recommended Citation

Hindy, Peter (2003) "Demining in Bihac With 5 Korpusa of the Bosnian Army," *Journal of Mine Action* : Vol. 7 : Iss. 2 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal/vol7/iss2/4>

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Demining in Bihac With 5 Korpusa of the Bosnian Army

"I once heard the world has a landmine problem. Since we are all in the world, we, despite whatever country we are in, have a landmine problem. The truth is not always easy to accept."

-Peter Hindy

Despite the end to years of brutal fighting in Bosnia, landmines left behind from the war still threaten the safety of local populations. The following article gives a firsthand account of a former Canadian soldier's demining experience in Bosnia alongside the Bosnian Army.

by Peter Hindy, Former Canadian Soldier

Introduction

On September 12, 2001, I arrived under guard at work and made my way to the top of the hill in Cekrilje, Bihac, Bosnia. I had a very strange, yet distinct sinking feeling from the tragedies of the terrorist attacks of the previous day. As I walked up the hill, I felt that I would have to somehow prove past the usual morning smile and cheerfulness that I was not personally angry and vengeful at the Muslim world for the actions taken by the poor excuses for soldiers who committed the attacks against the innocent people of New York. My entire team was Muslims and these brave men fought for the 5th Corps of the Bosnian Army (B5SW1) and for what they thought was right. They were the finest people I have ever known.

At first, the deminers would not initiate the usual conversation and a few stared at the ground. I explained to the other deminers that it was normal to feel tentative today towards me, a Westerner, as such a terrible thing had happened. After a short period of hesitant conversation, I was presented with the following statement. "Now people in America know what it was like in my town every day." The remark was not spoken in a harsh tone, but rather was relayed in a somber, respectful manner. After all, these men had been surrounded by brutal fighting in their proud satellite town of

Bihac for 1,200 plus days against overwhelming forces. They held their own for that entire battle through the good and the bad times. Even though the rest of the town has tried to get back to life after eight years of brutal conflict, these men are still fighting that same battle on the ground they had been on in July of 1995 in Cekrilje. The Serbs may have been defeated, but the mines are still standing awaiting their victims with patience and steadfast, ruthless dedication. But as terrible as these mines are, they do nothing to dampen the efforts of the sterling, professional character of the deminers of 5 Korpusa.



■ B5SW1 Team medic and two partners in crime, relax in the admin area.

Ghosts of the Battlefield

The minefield being cleared here today is one of many laid in 1992 during the conflict. In fact, 60 percent of these mines are unknown and unmarked, and the persons who laid them may be long dead. The belts of protective and tactical minefields on this land in this particular field of 50,000 square meters changed hands as many as nine times during

bloody battles to hold just a few hundred yards either way. Men died taking this ground. Sometimes photos, watches and other personal items are found—testament to what the world allowed to happen here in this country two hours from London. For the men of B5SW1, the war continues on daily from seven AM to two PM in the more than 30°C heat. Sweat, headaches, dirt, lack of proper food and water at times and the never-ending attention to detail to not become complacent were amongst the problems we faced. Complacency means death. But still the morale is maintained and life goes on through the good and the bad times in the demining business.

There are many reasons for each man to pay attention to ensure this tough job gets done right—the greatest of which is the human cost of war. I was reminded of the human casualties daily in the distance by the white patch of Bosnian and international volunteer fighters buried on the horizon in the military cemetery, and by the tombstones bearing the names of the dead, such as Vukovar, Laslovo, and Srebrenica. These men paid the ultimate sacrifice for freedom, and the nine men of B5SW1 were re-enforcing the success of every soldier who died trying to do the right thing. Every day under the gentle wind and thunderous silence of peace, the team carefully advances further into the ground that had not been ventured on since tracers split the air and screaming hot shrapnel and violent explosions tore lives and hopes for the future from sons of fathers and mothers with animal-like

Landmines in Europe & the Caucasus



■ Andy and some of team B5SW1 overlooking Bihac towards Croatia.

fury. Every now and then, a new lost soldier is discovered in this field and rightfully returned to finally give closure to the grieving loved ones who survived to see this day. But not before the deminers prove the ground and forests safe to once again tread—meter by meter, year by year, mine by mine.

Demining in the Fields of Bosnia

The demining is very slow work; on average, the team only clears about 100 meters a day. This is the safest obtainable speed in Cekrilje due to the rugged terrain and obstacles, without the use mine flails to help ease the process. The years of fighting show in the reclamation of the battleground by the forest and vegetation, which sensitize the mines—for example, putting extra weight on a tripwire or concealing a mine in a maze of twisted grass and roots. The tough terrain translates into very slow work for the deminers, who must sometimes burn the grass to prepare this ground before work can start. Every now and then a mine or item of UXO is discovered, and then is cautiously destroyed without touching it. With a steady hand, its evil black heart is removed, no longer able to cause sorrow to a child or farmer. Generations will live because of this minute.

After 20-minute shifts, the deminers switch around in twos and return to an area to relax, eat, drink and converse until their time is upon them to once again court death for all of us and ensure a safer world unnoticed and unappreciated by the many who simply know nothing of their hardships amidst their high-rise jobs in America. As the clock on a mine-free world ticks, the needle-like prodders probe the ground at 30-degree angles at two-cm intervals, ever so systematically, ever so cautiously, with love, dedication and the ever so carefully calculated pressure. Each time the prodder goes into the ground, the deminer risks his life. One push too hard—mistaking a mine for a

rock—and it's all over. Those are the cold facts; they are unavoidable, but the troops have been trained by the best and they are confident yet never lose respect for the mines and the destruction they can cause.

Hardships for the Deminers

The deminers of B5SW1 have seen war up close. Despite the dangers of demining, I was once told by a deminer with three children and a wife that he has no other choice but to do this work because of the economic hardships of Bosnia. "I will do this because of the war. A soldier was how I grew up. I never knew college; I knew only the rifle and the blood-soaked mud—the war. I wouldn't leave my town; I have made my life here. Now it's the only good money around. I have kids to feed. But if I ever lose respect for what I do, I shall quit that very day! This is no place for cowboys! We have a job to do and we must do it right!"

The team continues on day after day, mine after mine. Despite the heat, problems with getting proper kit and medical supplies, and even not getting paid their monthly wages on time, the deminers continue to work. Once, the deminers had to wait three months to receive their 700 Deutsche Marks per month pay. Another time, they knew they did not have enough IVs or morphine to treat the injured deminers. Despite these obstacles, the demining team continues their tedious task from March until November, working together. Sometimes you can hear them sing the same old Bosnian songs that were sung in the trenches just in front of them on lonely cold nights or in the rain amid the savagery as they work on. During the winter months, the team gets a break and completes a training course cycle, rests and recuperates. While they rest, the mines continue to claim their victims going about such everyday duties as a search for water or food, or a trip home from an uncle's house on a forest path. Sometimes they are rescued in time, sometimes no one knows until they are found. Sometimes they are children, sometimes old men or teachers. The mines wait on the same old confrontation lines in the snow-filled mountainsides and fields and rivers with the ghosts who guard the former battlefields. They don't need

rest, warmth or food. They are the perfect soldiers and they are very much at home.

Conclusion

The most important part of preventing landmine casualties is education. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) goes through great lengths in educating people to adopt behavior in order to avoid minefields and the unnecessary dangers that mines cause, as well as pass this knowledge on to others. But still people do not listen. Even with the knowledge of minefields now available, we still hear stories about someone who just wouldn't listen. As if the signs are not plain enough to see, people still risk their lives for that jug of water. One good indication is that since the war, the word is getting out in a big way; children are more aware and as long as the news is spread about the dangers of mines, I am confident generations will live now. Take a minute and think to yourself. When you are alone, when you feel the warm breeze on your back in your careless day with not much else to do, remember that every 30 minutes a mine has just claimed another victim. Think about what you personally have done to help your world today. Think of how you can help. Think outside the protective bubble about people who don't have the luxury or safety you enjoy so well and think for a minute of the people who are risking and giving their lives like gifts today for your tomorrow. ■

Note: Pete Hindy is currently an unemployed technical advisor and can be contacted at his email address (see below).

**All pictures courtesy of Peter Hindy.*

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